CHAPTER 6

DEVELOPING ACCOUNTABILITY

INTRODUCTION

Why develop an accountability program? Because accountability must be inherent in any organization that hires and fires people, gives them raises, bonuses and promotions.

An example may help explain the importance and purpose of accountability. Imagine a sports organization with an owner, manager, coach and team players. Each person has specific tasks and responsibilities that are critical to the overall success of the team.

A system of accountability ensures that each person on the team fulfills his or her responsibilities. When players fail to show up for practice with no reasonable cause, they are fined. If they perform poorly, for whatever reason, they fail to make the starting lineup. Players' contracts reflect trends in poor performance or relative value to the team, thus creating a form of personal accountability for performance. We have all heard of coaches and managers fired at the end – sometimes even in the middle – of a season. The potential for dismissal creates a very real sense of personal accountability between coaches and managers. For owners, consideration of profit and loss is a powerful motivator to do the job well. Reputation and public approval is a strong motivator for all team members.

One can readily see how important an accountability system is for a sports club and the purpose the system serves. Business also involves owners, managers, coaches (or supervisors) and players (the general staff). Each person on the team has his or her area of responsibility. Unfortunately, these areas are not always clearly defined, particularly in a small business. The organization's members may not understand that each person must perform at top efficiency to create a successful team.

Often, the owner also functions as manager and supervisor. Supervisors are sometimes asked to double as managers or production workers as the need arises. This kind of flexible and undefined (yet often necessary) organizational structure in a small business can lead to breakdown in accountability. New responsibilities and business initiatives are not always accompanied by additional personnel and existing programs may suffer.

In large businesses, responsibilities frequently are so complex that some get neglected. Accountability also breaks down when responsibilities are assigned but the needed authority or resources are not provided.

The purpose of an accountability program is to help all team members understand how critical their performance is and to teach them to take personal responsibility for their performance. Accountability ensures that your safety and health program is not just a "paper tiger" with no real power to win its objectives. The following steps will help you ensure safety and health accountability.

SET CLEAR GOALS AND ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITIES

Before you can hold people accountable for their actions, you must be sure they know what is expected of them. They must have goals set for their personal performance.

Individual goals for safety and health stem from the overall company goal. The method for setting your company goal was explained in Chapters 2 and 5. By working with these guides, you will have established your company's broad safety and health goal, the objectives leading to that goal, and a set of job descriptions with clearly delineated safety and health responsibilities.

The next step is to set individual performance objectives for employees with assigned safety and health responsibilities. These objectives must be understandable, measurable and achievable. It is your job to clearly establish who is responsible for performing specific tasks. Check your assignment of responsibilities to make sure that they specify who does what and that they are reasonably attainable. When objectives are unclear, the ball can easily get dropped, and it will be hard to figure out whose performance is lacking.

When you assign responsibilities to individuals, it is essential that you also delegate the necessary authority and/or commit sufficient resources. Few things can be more demoralizing to a conscientious employee than being given an assignment without the means necessary to carry it out. By providing the means you will be helping to ensure the accomplishing of objectives.

SET INDIVIDUAL OBJECTIVES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Objectives for individuals should be based upon performance measures. These are indicators that tell you whether the person did or did not perform as expected. The following considerations will help you set reasonable objectives:

- Aim your objectives at specific areas of performance that can be measured or verified. "Improve safety and health performance in my department next month," is too general an objective to be useful. A better objective would be, "Reduce first aid injuries by 10 percent over the next month." Even more measurable are those objectives over which the manager or supervisor has complete control, such as, "Hold 30 minute safety meetings for all employees in my division every Monday morning" or "Administer the hazard communication training program during the monthly safety meeting."
- Objectives should be realistic and attainable but also should represent a significant challenge.
- Appropriate authority is necessary. Example: A safety director's objective to improve the safety and health record in the Press Department is not directly attainable, because achievement is dependent on the performance of the Press Department supervisor and the workers supervised. An objective to determine specific classroom safety and health training needs, locate or develop the training, and notify managers of its availability is within the bounds of the safety director's authority and, therefore, is achievable.
- Adequate training is necessary. Example: A supervisor's objective is to investigate all accidents and near misses that occur in his/her area and ensure future prevention. This objective may be unattainable if the supervisor has not received training in accident/incident investigation techniques and hazard recognition. The supervisor also may need training in the access to appropriate hazard correction technology.
- Appropriate resources must be available. Example: A maintenance manager's objective is, "Ensure that all machinery is safe to operate." That objective will be unattainable without any appropriate budget for replacement parts and capital improvements. Similarly, if the manager is held accountable for a clean area at the end of each shift, but is not given enough staff to complete all tasks and finish the clean-up, an objective of clear aisles and work areas at shifts' end will be unattainable.
- Objectives need to be understood by all concerned parties. Use clear, understandable language that leaves no doubt what someone is required to do. Example: An objective is, "Investigate accidents to determine multiple causation." This may be unclear to a supervisor. "Investigate accidents to determine all causes and take corrective action within 24 hours of the accident," is a clearer, more specific objective.
- Objectives should be agreed to by those with responsibility for achieving them. Even when you and your supervisors agree on most issues, you should also discuss with them their safety and health performance objectives and secure their agreement or cooperation.

WRITE OBJECTIVES

Write each objective. State in specific terms what is to be achieved and to what degree. Include a deadline for accomplishing the objective. Try to keep the objective concrete and measurable. Later you will have to determine whether the objective has been achieved.

The very act of writing will help you clarify your meaning and intent. When questions arise, there will be a document to which you and others can refer. The existence of this document will signal that you are serious about meeting the objective.

Examples:

- Conduct weekly inspections in the department with emphasis on housekeeping, personal protective equipment, preventive maintenance and the wear of critical machine parts.
- Determine the causes of any accident occurring in the department, and take corrective action within 24 hours.
- Track to elimination all hazards identified through employee reports of hazards, accident/incident investigations and weekly planned inspections.
- Complete one job safety analysis each month for the department.

Give a copy of the performance objectives to the employee for whom they were written. Refer to these objectives in future performance discussions with this employee.

REVIEW OBJECTIVES

Periodically review the performance objectives to make sure you are getting the desired performance and results. For instance, if a supervisor meets the objectives but the department continues to have too many accidents, too many close calls or no improvement in conditions, then the objectives need to be revised.

Performance evaluation can be verbal, written or both. An effective evaluation will include the following critical elements:

- It should be performed at specified intervals. If performance evaluation is new to your business, short intervals will be helpful at first. Unacceptable performance can be spotted and changed quickly. As your employees become accustomed to working toward defined performance objectives, the intervals between evaluations can be lengthened. The evaluation can become an opportunity to provide encouragement and refresher training.
- The evaluation always should be performed against a backdrop of previously defined objectives (as discussed above). There should be no surprises to the person being evaluated regarding what was expected. Should problems develop, it may be necessary to modify the objectives to ensure that they are understandable, measurable and achievable. You may decide that your employee needs a more careful explanation of what is expected and possibly some additional training.
- Ideally, the evaluation can be an opportunity for the evaluator and the person being evaluated to explore ways of improving both the system and the performance of the individual. Negative attitudes, such as refusal to listen to one another, animosity, blaming one another, or fear and intimidation serve only to limit the evaluation's usefulness.
- The goal of the evaluation session should be to encourage personal responsibility and the individual's efforts toward improving the performance of the team. Give positive reinforcement for a job well done. This commendation may, if possible, lead to more tangible rewards such as bonuses, awards, raises, etc.
- Both parties must be able to come to some agreement on needed changes in objectives or performance. If the evaluation determines that performance did not meet expectations, some changes must be made. Sometimes the required changes will be obvious. In other

cases, you may need to carefully explore the reasons for the objective not being met and discuss possible solutions.

- Perhaps the wrong person was assigned a particular responsibility. A simple change in assignments may alleviate the problem. Perhaps the level of authority of the assigned person needs to be increased. The objectives themselves may need to be modified and employees helped to develop capabilities that they do not presently possess (and for which they should not, therefore, be held accountable). The agreed upon changes must be incorporated into the already existing performance objectives. Many evaluation systems break down when managers fail to incorporate and implement changes.
- There must be a point where some predetermined consequences for poor performance begins.

Some task monitoring may be necessary to support the performance evaluation. For example, you may need to monitor a supervisor's accident investigations after each accident until it is clear that the supervisor has developed the necessary skills. This task monitoring can form the substance of later performance evaluations.

Keep in mind that the complexity and formality of your evaluations should be in keeping with the rest of your safety and health program.

SET CONSEQUENCES FOR FAILURE TO PERFORM ADEQUATELY

At first, as the employee learns new skills and changes behavior patterns, consequences for poor performance should be nil or minimal. Instead, use positive reinforcement during this initial phase of performance evaluation to encourage your employee's natural desire to do well and to be recognized.

Although the goal of any accountability program should be to develop a sense of personal accountability for actions, individuals often need to know there are negative consequences for poor performance. Consequences reinforce the importance of meeting objectives. Be sure that supervisors and managers understand when the consequence will occur. There should be no surprises.

Consequences need to be appropriate to the situation. Firing a supervisor for the first poorly conducted accident investigation is an obvious example of overacting to a problem. Gradually, through, the consequences of poor performance should be increased to some specified maximum severity. One common disciplinary system consists of 1) verbal warning, 2) written warning, 3) fines or suspensions, and as a last resort, 4) determination. You may find, however, that other consequences produce the desired results. You can experiment with a variety of consequences as long as your employees are fully informed of your intentions. See Chapter 8 for a further discussion of discipline in the workplace.

You may eventually conclude that the individual is not capable of handling the assigned responsibilities. Sufficient training and support through the accountability system have been documented, and poor performance continues. At this point, the reason for the problem (inadequate capabilities, improper attitudes, etc.) should not be the issue. The maximum degree of consequence must be enforced. Otherwise other employees will conclude the consequences are not to be taken seriously or do not apply equally to everyone. This belief among employees will destroy any change for an effective accountability program.

SUMMARY

An accountability system is essential if all the hard work and effort you spent in developing a safety and health program is not to be lost. However, there is more to an accountability program than enforcing punishment for "bad" employees (including managers and supervisors). The accountability program aims to methodically teach your managers and supervisors to take personal responsibility for their actions and the subsequent effect of these actions on the team.

This is achieved by:

- Clearly defining expected performance in written performance objectives;
- Periodically evaluating this performance jointly with individual employees;
- Allowing your employees the freedom to learn and develop in a positive, non-threatening atmosphere.

Your employees deserve to have a clear understanding of the nature, severity and timetable of consequences. The interaction between employer and employees provided by an effective accountability program allows your employees to choose for themselves: they can change their performance, they can attempt to change but ultimately acknowledge an inability to perform adequately, or they can choose to ignore your expectations and endure the consequences.